
Chapter 1

Introduction: lived experience, lifelong learning, community activism and social change

This book arises from the urgency expressed by many adult educators, theorists and activist-researchers for the need to draw attention to the numerous sites of community activism, learning and social change that are currently taking place across the globe. While the relentless push of neoliberalism has struck at the heart of adult education provision in many countries, including that provided by universities, institutions of further education, international development agencies, NGOs, vocational training centres and the local government sector, what can adult educators learn and what is being learnt when we turn to sites of community activism? For example, Tett and Hamilton (2019, p. 253), drawing on Williams' (1989) 'resources of hope', point to the importance of '... persisting with what may seem like mundane, everyday, acts of resistance that are based on seeing and sensing opportunities to do and say things differently'.

Raymond Williams identified the cultural hegemony implicit in elite education systems as leading to 'a very restricted and privileged and stagnant view of the world' (Williams 1983, p. 255). He saw a particular place for adult education, as implicitly activist, seeking to 'unseat the status quo' (Walters 2022), tackling cognitive injustice and cultural hegemony. We celebrate his view that

The true position was, always essentially was, that the impulse to Adult Education was not only a matter of remedying deficit, making up for inadequate educational resources in the wider society, nor only a case of meeting new needs of the society, though those things contributed. The deepest impulse was the desire to make learning part of the process of social change itself (Williams 1983, in McIlroy and Westwood 1993, p. 257).

Our focus on social change underpins the ambition to provide a space for practitioners, theorists and activist-researchers to share community activist practices from around the world and provide insight into the ways these have contributed to social change and political transformation in different spaces and communities. And in an effort to encourage that ambition and to promote a range of texts and voices, we have included chapters drawing on empirical research as well as stories and blogs about social change and transformation from those participating in community activist struggles. Whether these local changes are contributing to broader social change is explored more fully in this book. But, perhaps the more important point is that these local resistances ARE taking place and ARE being documented and thus provide important resources of hope for battling injustices and various forms of

oppression in diverse sites locally, nationally and globally.

What adult education and community activism bring is a focus on criticality, forms of public pedagogy which are able to consider and scrutinise power differentials, and on creating the space for critical political action. This could be described as a renewed education for social purpose. Seth Visvanathan has described this approach to education as 'cognitive justice' which enables us to perceive that 'diverse communities' have a stake in problem solving, based on conversation and reciprocity and that this is a deeply shared form of collectivism, the creation of new and stronger networks, across country and even ideological boundaries, offering shared spaces for power sharing and problem-solving and reducing fragmentation in an increasingly atomised world. As Visvanathan stated: 'These forms of knowledge, especially the ideas of complexity, represent new forms of power sharing and problem-solving that go beyond the limits of voice and resistance' (Visvanathan, 2009, http://www.india-seminar.com/2009/597/597_shiv_visvanathan.htm).

Our collection begins both intentionally and appositely with Fitzsimons' article: 'Critical Education in the Irish Repeal Movement'. When the original Call for Papers for the *Studies in the Education of Adults* special issue on **lived experience, lifelong learning, community activism and social change** was first circulated in 2019, who would have imagined in June 2022, the US Supreme Court overturning *Roe v Wade*? Abortions are now illegal in many states in the US, abortion care has been criminalised and women no longer have the right to choose what happens to their bodies. Fitzsimons provides a detailed account of a very different trajectory in Ireland with the repeal of the 8th Amendment (the 8th had made most abortions in Ireland illegal). Her chapter argues that a strong grassroots 'repeal movement' that had grown over a 35-year period, which was underpinned by critical pedagogy and education, was a significant contributor to the change in the law and the resulting social change that is now unfolding. Fitzsimons' focus on the educational aspects of the Irish repeal movement makes an important contribution to better understanding the pedagogic dimensions that were integral to this social change. She also introduces a methodology that points to the important part of the activist-scholar and what they are able to contribute to processes of knowledge production. We hear close-up accounts from those participating in the movement and their lived experiences and learning in and through social movement activism.

The chapters by John Player, and Amea Wilber and colleagues, then share a concern with different dimensions and conceptualisations of critical pedagogy and 'voice'. They are a powerful reminder of Arundhati Roy's argument about 'voice': 'We know of course there's really no such thing as the "voiceless". There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard' (Roy, 2006, p. 330). Player, in his chapter, makes distinctive contributions to this debate. The place of the silenced and unheard, in the context of

his research on pedagogies of hope and drug related deaths in Scotland, take distinctive forms. But particular local inflections sit within wider debates on critical pedagogy and 'voice'. Does critical pedagogy face an 'identity crisis' - detached from critical theory? Player emphasises the potential for it to re-discover and build on radical and transformative practices within Scottish histories and traditions. 'Seeds of hope' (Williams 1989) are rooted in specific pedagogies and communities - that offer socially transformative possibilities. Player takes two examples from his own practice. 'The Share: Learning for Democracy' offers space to examine social causes of addiction and, in turn, further advocacy work relates to how dialogic approaches of critical pedagogy could be used in collective work with former miners in de-industrialised communities. These possibilities need to be nurtured.

Amea Wilber, and colleagues, offer another distinctive contribution to research on critical pedagogy by exploring why they designed a podcast and asking how it was used as a form of creative expression and collaborative adult learning. They analyse how their experience in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada is a catalyst for activism that generates a deeper understanding of the meanings of diverse lived experiences of migration. In their chapter, they argue that emphasising the value of the podcast, as a learning tool and medium, highlights the under researched emotional and participatory dimensions of arts-based podcast-making, teaching, and research. They identify why it is vital to listen to how newcomers to Canada frame their stories and understand their lived experiences through a methodology of narrative inquiry and elements of participatory narrative inquiry. Their analysis of dialogue, and the place of the podcast host, explores how interviews are co-constructed with guests through a relational approach. The podcast storytellers include an anthropologist and visual ethnographer, adult educators and exiled Kurdish journalists, an immigrant from Trinidad and Tobago, and activist in Canada advocating for inclusion and the dismantling of racist practices in Canadian workplaces. They underscore how storytelling can overturn stereotypes, challenge assumptions about certain groups of people and make meaning:

'What happens is that when you don't hear about a group of people, they don't become mysteries we get excited about, no when a group of people are unknown, they're easily dehumanised. They're easily even demonised, right? So, it was true storytelling that we can make this connection'.

Suresh Gautam's chapter looks at women's activism in Nepal, and particularly, as his title suggests, the 'Emancipatory Interests of Multiple Literacies for Activism and Community Transformation'. He argues that 'Literacies are the social processes that emerge and sustain, from everyday life, representing and transforming the mundane and repeated activities which resist the unequal power adjustment in society'. It suggests that 'informal learning and literacies cultivate critical reflexivity of people to perform like activists'. The chapter particularly seeks to explore 'informal learning and

literacies that foster awareness of existing social hierarchies and structures to help bring about change in family and social life'. Two adult women's groups were purposefully selected in a village in Nepal. Gautam concludes that informal learning and literacies are the process of activism that enables change in the lives of adult women and the wider community, thereby recognising and valuing adult learning and literacies.

McVicar and Roy examine lived experience, learning, community activism and social change in a setting that is not usually understood as a setting for community activism. Using documentary films as a learning resource, they report on the learning of a group of women prisoners in Canada. Roy has written elsewhere on the power of documentaries as a resource for learning (2016) and '*Eye opening: case study of a documentary film series in a carceral setting*' reinforces that view as the authors recount the experiences of the women participating in the film workshops. The four films screened over four weeks were chosen carefully and there was a recurring inspirational theme whereby the protagonists encounter and successfully deal with challenges in diverse settings. After watching the films each week, the women shared their responses and discussed what they found useful, meaningful, moving and enriching. Not only does the chapter illustrate the value of this type of arts-based pedagogy in prison settings, but it also points to the tensions of conducting research in a setting where power relations between the researcher and researched are in stark contrast. It also subtly brings into focus the state sanctioned violence performed through incarceration and the value of 'nurture(ing) human connection in environments constructed to dehumanize'.

Witiw takes us to a very different site of community activism, learning and social change in '*We are the Soil*' to a Movement with '*Peasants in the Centre*:' *The Grassroots-Social Movement Learning Nexus in Rosia Montanva, Romania*. This chapter theorises 'learning in social action' drawing on a detailed study of a grassroots environmental activist movement in Rosia Montanva, Romania. Witiw documents the struggle between small landholders and villagers and a multinational Canadian mining company by drawing on interview material and observations collected during a three month visit to the research site. He skilfully locates the study by re-presenting the post-communist 'developments' leading up to the struggle. This provides the context for an analysis of the learning in social action as the villagers were able to mobilise locally through the formation of grassroots activist movements such as Alburnus Maior and then formed national and transnational alliances. Witiw's study makes an important contribution to literature on social movement learning with its focus on the nexus of grassroots struggles and trans/inter/national social movements.

In this book we include a series of blogs too. These serve a dual purpose. By widening, and extending, the voices of those who speak, we share these examples not only to celebrate examples of practice- but to inspire action in the future. Follow this link to read these blogs about forms of collaborative practice:

In *Celebrating resources of hope: the story and place of a research circle*(<https://studiesintheeducationofadults.wordpress.com/2022/07/25/celebrating-resources-of-hope-the-story-and-place-of-a-research-circle/>), Clancy and Jones underscore the need to reconfigure adult education, particularly in England, and describe a process whereby they are engaging in that work. They provide an account of a series of research circles they have facilitated in different parts of the country, where they have provided spaces for adult educators, community workers and activists to gather and discuss their work. The circles have grown out of the work of the Centenary Commission on Adult Education (2019) and the approach is underpinned by Williams' compelling notion of 'resources of hope'. The circles are spaces of vitality and hope, and they demonstrate that the starving of funds in the community sector in England has not killed the ambition to operate in more democratic, expansive and socially just ways.

Hoelze is a feminist activist practitioner-scholar and is exploring participatory ways of knowing and political change. In her work she demonstrates that ambition in *'We are a group of excellent women' – Online activist learning with a group of migrant women during COVID-19*

(<https://studiesintheeducationofadults.wordpress.com/2022/07/25/we-are-a-group-of-excellent-women-online-activist-learning-with-a-group-of-migrant-women-during-covid-19/>). She describes the way a group of migrant women in south London have worked collectively during lockdown to share their knowledges and learning in an online space to fight back against the current hostile environment in the UK. Many of these women have faced extreme challenges as a result of current government legislation on No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF). However, rather than simply accepting the hostile environment they have acted collectively and politically to make change, including writing and publishing a manifesto, producing an amazing artwork that was displayed at the Feminist Library in Peckham, and working as volunteers to support the ongoing work of the South London Refugee Association Women's Group.

In *'The Great Escape! A Woman's Reflection on collective kindness and new power models written during the pandemic'*

(<https://studiesintheeducationofadults.wordpress.com/2022/07/25/the-great-escape/>), Sally Bonnie also reflects on the impact of the Covid pandemic on a women's organization. Writing about Inspire, in Oldham, in the Northwest of England in the UK, she considers the impact of the long pandemic period which saw 'the disappearance of human touch, disconnection, isolation, great loss and overstretched services'. She locates this within the wider context of power and hierarchy: 'From the outset Inspire

has been about collective participation de-emphasising the role of traditional hierarchies. How we operate is important because it sends out a clear message that says, "you can connect here, you can contribute here, you can learn here, you can re-discover the gifts, the assets you left behind, when you began to see yourself only as a set of labels defined by others". Bonnie concludes by emphasising how the work she has collectively nurtured, with other women, relates to Heimans and Timms (2018) 'ideas of old power' and possibilities of new forms. If old power dictates 'who comes in and who stays out' then new models are generated and re-imagined by women-in-action.

In '*Later life learning and the demands of activism: the case of Kilburn Older Voices Exchange*' <https://studiesintheeducationofadults.wordpress.com/2022/07/25/late-life-learning-and-the-demands-of-activism-the-case-of-kilburn-older-voices-exchange/>, Miles contrasts the contributions of older people to civic and community engagement, and how these have frequently been marginalised, with the compelling example of Kilburn Older Voices Exchange (KOVE). He examines why different forms of dialogue are essential for activists within the association, for their campaigning and wider forms of institutional change. However, Miles also highlights tensions between the roles of the association, its membership and demands of participating in campaigns (including the Toilet Manifesto for London Group). His conclusion emphasises why lifelong learning for older learners needs funding and space- if commitments to social and environmental justice are to thrive.

So, what can adult educators learn and what is being learnt when we turn to sites of community activism as a mechanism for broader social change?

While we have tried to include contributions from different countries that represent often under-represented groups as knowing and agentic, rather than oppressed groups that are acted on by those in power, and that draw on theories and theorists from the Global South; from our view we feel that there is still a significant imbalance in our field in terms of theorising and empirical research from the Global South. This is a critical issue as these are often the spaces where struggles over land rights, feminist struggles over gender justice, and the broader struggle over the ways knowledges are produced are playing out. These are 'stories constituted by a collective catching up to what is already happening in ordinary worlds shaped in a crisis- defined and continuing now' (Berlant 2011, p. 54). The chapters in this book remind us of the importance of documenting and directing attention to small changes and mundane acts of resistance, of making the invisible visible, the unheard, heard and listened to; and for creating spaces for learning to be equal (Harman, 2022).

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Chapter 8: Afterword: Resources for a Journey of Hope

Each chapter and blog in this special issue book and collection, relate to different dimensions of community, democracy and dialogue and how this space has become one in which delimiting factors must constantly be fought. In these contributions, questions of critical pedagogy and voice, and contested notions of power, place and voice, are lived, felt and troubled in different national and international contexts. These debates, in turn, address our collaborative work, with others, developing a research circle on 'Fostering and building community, democracy and dialogue. By critically reflecting on this work (Clancy and Jones, 2022; Clancy, Jones, Forster and West, 2023), we ask how collaborative practices have developed in a particular time, form and place, since the Summer of 2020, and have been inspired in this work by Raymond Williams' description of our remaining "resources for a journey of hope", those communal means by which we seek emancipation in the last chapter of *Towards 2000* (Williams, 1983). Democracy and intellectual flexibility and reflexivity - so long connected with the communitarian thrust of adult education - and the qualities of kindness, humility and sympathy central to human fellowship are in danger of being seen as quaint in contemporary society. The Research Circle has been a return to a communal response to these challenges.

In July 2020, the Centenary Commission on Adult Education's held an event, 'Reconstructing Society: Research Circles', hosted by the Co-operative College. It focused on developing self-directed groups/study circles and examined these issues:

- What has been learned from the COVID-19 experience that is of lasting value?
- How can learning take place online and still be embedded in local contexts?
- What kinds of learning will be needed after the lockdown? For what purposes, and for whom?

Our work built on the key chapter in the Commission's 2019 report that focused on the importance of community-based and 'popular' adult education. *Adult Education and Lifelong Learning for 21st Century Britain* was published in pre-pandemic times. The 2019 report, and the more recent work of the Commission, aimed to be visionary in scope and practical in its detail, for the good of our democracy, society, economy, and for the health and wellbeing of our citizens. A core chapter in the Report entitled 'Fostering community, democracy and dialogue through adult lifelong education' (Centenary Commission, 2019, pp. 19 – 28) began with the 1919 Report's emphasis that "An uneducated democracy cannot be other than a failure". Recurring contemporary

struggles to find space for wider and richer forms of lifelong learning is where the research circle began.

Like its predecessor the 1919 Report (*The Final and Interim Reports of the Adult Education Committee of the Ministry of Reconstruction, 1918-1919*, HMSO, 1919), we are now at a critical time, as we face a series of social, political, economic, environmental, health, technological and demographic challenges, alongside the deepening impact of austerity and a narrowing vision of education.

Professor Sir Michael Marmot, a key speaker at our May 2022 Research Circle event on health inequalities, identified the critical importance of education as a means of empowerment – conferring a sense of control over one’s life – and suggested that positive health outcomes are significantly more influenced by social than by clinical determinants. Back in 2010, in *Fair Society, Healthy Lives - The Marmot Review*, Professor Marmot suggested that an individual’s health and wellbeing is 70% driven by social determinants and only 30% by clinical factors. The Review also highlighted the social gradient of health inequalities and the deleterious impact of a lower social and economic status on an individual’s overall health, demonstrating the impact of place and poverty. Marmot argued that health inequalities arise from a complex interaction of factors - housing, income, education, social isolation, disability - all of which are strongly affected by an individual’s economic and social status. In *The Marmot Review 10 years on* (2020) Marmot et al identified an intensification of inequalities: “From rising child poverty and the closure of children’s centres, to declines in education funding, an increase in precarious work and zero hours contracts, to a housing affordability crisis and a rise in homelessness, to people with insufficient money to lead a healthy life and resorting to foodbanks in large numbers, to ignored communities with poor conditions and little reason for hope” (Marmot, Foreword, 2020, p.5). Marmot et al identified swingeing cuts to the voluntary and community sector, many of whom have provided vital community resources in the face of austerity, with an overall cut between 2010/11 and 2015/16 of £802 million from the voluntary sector, often an act of desperation by beleaguered local government (Marmot et al, 2020, p. 97).

In the last three years, the circle has engaged with important issues relating to democracy in crisis – in health matters, in issues of climate breakdown, in the contested relationship between university and community knowledge - as well as sought to identify and create resources of hope. It has asked: how does adult education link with and foster our democracy? Why are our shared histories, memories, and instances of managing previous struggles all-important? The writers of the 1919 Adult Education Committee’s *Final Report* faced these questions head on – they recognised that our democracy and spaces for dialogue, debate and dissent need to be defended and constantly fought for. This has, arguably, never been truer than at the current juncture in the UK, in countering a sense of despair and impotence, particularly in the

communities hardest hit by the exigencies of the past four decades and the long-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and ongoing climate crisis.

By building on, and making a distinctive contribution to, earlier Scandinavian research and practice on study and research circles (Harnsten, 1994) the circle has taken as its inspiration and starting point the Swedish circle model. This emerged from 'the struggle of social movements in the late 1900s and early 2000s popular education in Sweden', and developed into 'educational practices, such as study circles...with a unique level of participation' (Laginder, Nordvall, and Crowther, 2013, p.3). In our case, as six to eight active members, drawn from backgrounds in adult, further and higher education, the voluntary and community sector and trade union education, we share a deep commitment to social purpose education. By sharing experiences and critical engagement, a series of nine online events, over three years between 2020 and 2023, have been designed to explore and generate new and existing forms of practice-and hope. Our focus has been to critically examine the current state of HE/FE/adult education, and particularly education with a social purpose and its emancipatory dimensions. Where are our places and spaces for critical and imaginative reconstruction?

The Editorial in the latest issue of Soundings (Number 84 & 85, Summer/Autumn 2023) articulates how notions of 'choice' have become new ways of restricting discourse and dissent: 'Neoliberalism and marketisation profess their commitment to 'choice', but - as the articles in this issue clearly demonstrate - the process of marketisation in HE has itself involved, as well as running alongside, a whole set of restrictions on decision-making, and in a whole range of ways' (Soundings, 2023, p.12). Raymond Williams described this new, and not so new, managerialism as a profoundly pessimistic hall of mirrors, a world of appearances, in which Public Relations takes precedence over any substance, describing its acolytes thus: 'Plan X' people resemble the hardest kinds of revolutionary, who drive through at any cost to their perceived objectives, but the difference of Plan X from revolution is that no transformed society, no new order, no lasting liberation seriously enters these new calculations, though their rhetoric may be retained (Williams, 1983, p.152).

Howard Stevenson in his article on higher education and policy in Soundings, argues that the forms of managerialism in universities have led to an increasing 'closing down of debate' along with any form of dissent, highlighting 'the extent to which the modern university has become a business unit driven by income generation rather than a public space in which academic freedom is encouraged first and foremost. It highlights the need for a much more radical agenda across the education sector' (Stevenson, Soundings, p.192).

In this context, the Research Circle has become increasingly a space where we have recognised the need to move beyond a deadening form of managerialist education which is arguably no longer fit for purpose. We have understood the vital need for voicing our stories, across community, across space and place, to help us address the deeply felt matters of inequality, unfairness, inequity and also to help us reclaim that interconnected relationality between the human and more than human. Hearing others' stories has become essential to the process of reflection, humility and curiosity that is necessary to our collective flourishing, learning from old human wisdom, using affective language in order to counter the moribund ideas of modernity which have brought us to this space of climate collapse and disconnection. As Dr Elizabeth Lange, author of the inspiring book, *Transformative Sustainability Education: Reimagining our Future* (2023), stated in a powerful PIMA event on October 5th, 2023, entitled 'Composting Modernity', we are at a point where we need to remember that 'no person is self-contained but rather is embedded relationally'.

In our research circle events, since 2021, we have woven together presentations and dialogues powerfully illustrating these values of relationality and commitment to social justice. In the North East of England, Jan Vincent and colleagues from 'Aspire Learning Support and Wellbeing' in Durham, gave voice to the importance of community adult education, the power of place in relation to community building and the challenges of place-based activism. This was also embodied by Sally Bonnie and her work with 'Inspire', in Oldham, in the Northwest of England - highlighted in our Introduction. In both instances, what these practices share is a commitment by women, in working-class communities, to shaping their own lives - and not being the object of limited and constraining forms of lifelong learning. Although the work of Richard Hazledine is with younger adult learners, he shares the same commitment to adult education for a change grounded in a specific time and other place. At the research circle, he reported on young adults, in Nottingham, furthest from work. Their mistrust and lack of confidence, because of what has been done 'to them', embodied the dangers of 'scarring' and a lack of agency.

In our critical engagement and response, the research circle has returned again and again to Williams' notion of 'resources for a journey of hope' (Williams, 1983), seeking to reimagine particular forms of democratic adult lifelong education - within and outside higher education-. We have focused throughout on two key contemporary questions - with a historical and contemporary resonance: who has the power to speak and how we can collectivise to build our voice and resources for a journey of hope? We have also explored why the work of Raymond Williams, and his concept of the 'democratic educator', should continue to enrich and inform debates about 'the democratisation of knowledge'. Williams argued that adult education should never be about remedying educational 'deficit' or as a simple response to social change but should be "part of the process of social change itself" (Williams, 1989, p. 157) and that

the ultimate objective of adult education should be its support for “an educated and participating democracy” (Williams, 1961, p.178)

What next? Sustaining critical engagement and collaboration’

In further collaborative research and work with other members of the Editorial Board of ‘Studies in the Education of Adults’ and professional associations (specifically, Universities Association for Lifelong Learning – UALL, the Standing Conference on University Teaching and Research on the Education of Adults – SCUTREA and the PIMA Network - a global network of adult and lifelong learning educators, activists, and scholars, seeking the attainment of greater social, economic and ecological justice) we will actively seek to engage with and nurture a wider range of research from the Global South on community democracy, dialogue - and how these concepts are experienced in other contexts. We will consider how everyday lived experience, in the lives of ordinary people, helps create the constitutive processes of culture, the ways in which it is made and shaped by human and ecological agency.

We will continue to do this through our collaborative work with other members of the Research Circle, through which we have managed to sustain spaces for engagement with one another (Gornall and Salisbury, 2012, p.138) - but these moments of ‘slowing down’ have contrasted sharply with a catalogue of other competing demands in the academic world of the continually ‘extended professional’ and the ‘roaming workplace’ (Gornall et al, 2012, p. 136) which continually threaten to overwhelm us. However, in a further reminder of Harnsten (1994), we seek to keep alive these vital conversations however problematic. They remind us, crucially, of Williams’ conviction ‘that education, in his words permanent education, is an essential part of addressing the future and securing safety, stability, security, justice and equity for the citizens of the globe’ (Menter, 2023, p.182) and we continue to develop ourselves within this process as brokers, advocates, dreamers and critical thinkers.

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